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The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter

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Although difficult to appreciate now, cinema as a narrative form was not an inevitable development. From the beginning of early cinema, it was a 'cinema of attractions', enjoyed primarily for the spectacle, not for the story. Films such as those by the Lumiére brothers (known as actualities) could be seen as primitive

documentaries, simply documenting reality. The Edison Manufacturing Company can be seen as having a large influence on the American industry in the shift to story film from nonfiction and short comedies. One of the most influential filmmakers within the Edison Company was Edwin Stanton Porter. It can be said that it was Porter's films that gave rise to the codification of genre, while simultaneously initiating auteur cinema. Through his innovative use of dissolves, gradual transitions and cross-cutting, Porter pioneered the use of continuity editing that was mostly easily assimilated by the audience.

Porter was particularly skilled in taking ideas already in existence and developing them; reworking themes or techniques. An early example of this was his 1902 *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Filming fairy tales had become relatively common through Georges Méliés and G.A. Smith, who '[adapted] and [revitalized] this staple of the screen, [and] made fairy tales an important genre of cinema. Porter now followed in their lead.' (Musser, *The Early*

Cinema of Edwin Porter, 22) Porter's film contains cinematic and narrative elements, however it is mostly theatrical, with a focus on the idea of dreams and visions, which was a popular device at the time. Within the film there is the development of a fictional world, tied to the development 'of a more elaborate narrative…with spatial and temporal relationships between scenes.' (Musser, *The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter* , 24) The scenes are carefully constructed scenes with narrative continuities, which give the audience the information to interpret the spatial relationships between the shots. This is not perfect however. In scene 5 for example, there is a continuity error following scene 4, where Jack is shown by the window in his nightgown. At the start of scene 5 though, he is still by the window, but instead he is fully clothed. Temporality was also an issue in *Jack and the Beanstalk,* an issue which faced most filmmakers during this time. Spatial relationships could be easily adopted from the earlier magic lantern shows, but this 'temporal dimension' proved more difficult, as the lantern shows from which these films were developed only had static slides to express the passing of time. The film was a major success however, and his following films

showed increasingly improved developments in narrative continuity.

Porter's next major cinematic breakthrough came in January 1903 with *Life of an American Fireman.* Heavily influenced by James Williamson's *Fire!* from 1901, the topic was popular with audiences at the time. Another show dealing with the same topic was *Bob the Fireman,* a twelve-slide lantern show that was sold throughout the United States in 1902-03. The fire film had proved successful for the Edison Company even earlier, when in 1896 it produced three films: *Starting for the Fire, A Morning Alarm* and *Fighting a Fire.* This indicates that the role of the firefighter in society was changing during these developments in modernity.

Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* contains seven scenes, depicting a woman and child being saved from a burning building. Hailed as one of the first examples of cross-cutting, it is considered highly innovative. There has been some controversy surrounding this however. There are two versions of the film available, one held in the Library of Congress, and the other in the Museum of Modern Art. Both versions are essentially identical except for

scene 7, which is the final scene of the film. In the Library of Congress version, the scene is in three shots; in the MoMA version it is in nine. Therefore at some point, the last two shots of the LoC were taken and intercut, 'following the action as it moves back and forth between the interior and exterior, matching action several times as the fireman goes through the window.' (Musser, *The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter,* 30) This version uses temporal repetition, while the MoMA employs parallel editing and matching action. This controversy is so substantial as it affects the entirety of the way we look at the film history of early cinema. If we accept the Library of Congress version as the original it can be deemed progressive, while if we accept the MoMA version, Porter was not as innovative within film history as previously believed. According to Charles Musser however, the preponderance of evidence shows that the Library of Congress paperprint is the original version, due to the internal consistency, and also the consistency of Porter's filmmaking development. Another impressive element of the film is the use of the theme of vision and dreams, which was also prevalent in *Jack and the Beanstalk.* We first see this first the beginning of scene 1, and this device 'is repeated using photographic

means…the inset being another scene placed in a dark part of the frame by superimposition.' (Salt, 152)

The most impressive of Porter's films however is arguably *The Great Train Robbery,* which was copyrighted in December 1903. It is regarded as a commercially successful confirmation of the cinematic breakthroughs of Edwin Porter. This film, more so than those made before by him expressed the shift to fiction films, a shift inscribed in the film's form: 'systems of editing, genres, methods of constructing viewing positions, depiction of landscapes.' (Musser, *Moving Towards Fictional Narratives,* 89) It was filmed in several locations: at Edison's New York studio, Essex County Park in New Jersey and along the Lackawanna railway during November 1903. With detail, the film traces the precise steps of a train robbery, and also the means by which the bandits are tracked down and killed. The narrative structure of the film, much more successfully than *Life of an American Fireman,* utilises temporal repetition resulting in an effective narrative progression overall. Scene 3 (the robbery of the mail car) and scene 4 (the fight on the tender) occur simultaneously even though they are shown successively. There is a

return to an earlier moment in time to repeat other action from another perspective. This happens most noticeably as the telegraph operator regains consciousness and alerts the men who pursue the bandits. Scenes 11 and 12 then trace a second line of action, which apparently occurs simultaneously within the diegesis of the film as the robbery and getaway. According to Musser however, 'Porter's temporal construction remains imprecise and open to interpretation by the showman's spiel or by audiences through their subjective understanding.' (Musser, *Moving Towards Fictional Narratives,* 90)

This issue of narrative clarity is complex. For audiences at the time who were not accustomed to temporal repetition and overlap in narrative cinema, how were they to know which scenes were happening simultaneously? There are no intertitles, so much of the audience's understanding depended on their familiarity with other forms of popular culture within which the story was situated. It was based on a play of the same name by Scott Marble, and Wild West shows were common. Furthermore, frequent newspaper reports of train holdups were common at the time provided a necessary frame of reference that facilitated audience understanding.

These chase films became increasingly popular, and as used by Biograph, 'the chase encouraged a simplification of story line and a linear progression of narrative that made the need for a familiar story or a showman's narration unnecessary.' (Musser, *Moving Towards Fictional Narratives,* 92) Porter however did not use the chase in *The Great Train Robbery* in order to simplify the narrative; he used it in order to incorporate it within a more complex popular story. The movie is also considered to be the first Western film; and subsequently Porter is considered by many to be the initiator of the Western film genre. One other notable aspect of *The Great Train Robbery* is its innovative use of a close-up of one of the bandits firing directly at the audience. This could be placed at any point throughout the film, though mostly at the end or the beginning. This is not only inventive as an impressive close-up, but it also breaks the fourth wall which audiences would not have been used to at the time.

The role of Edwin S. Porter in the development of narrative cinema is undoubtedly central even if his singularity has sometimes been overstated. Through his inventive reworking of contemporary themes and texts, his use of continuity editing and his pioneering work in the Western genre and the filmmaker as auteur, Porter retains a place in history as one of the most influential filmmakers at the beginning of the 20th Century.